

PASSAGE OF EMERGENCY SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING FOR FARM SERVICE AGENCY NEEDED NOW

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. MINGE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MINGE. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to highlight the long delay in passing the emergency supplemental funding for the Farm Service Agency lending programs and FSA staffing budget.

This is truly an emergency, in every sense of the word. Tracy Beckman, FSA Director in my state of Minnesota, has told me that he will be forced to lay off FSA employees because of the delay in passing the emergency supplemental. The demand for loans and other FSA services is skyrocketing because of the commercial banks' concern about declining farm incomes. Many producers are having a difficult time securing private sector operating loans. FSA has to step in to fill the gap with guaranteed and direct loans to producers. Demand for loans this year is up 75% from a year ago, the Secretary of Agriculture tells me.

Minnesota FSA will approve more loan applications by the end of the fiscal year than they have funding. If this supplemental is not approved, they will be unable to deliver the funds to farmers because their accounts have run dry. Planting season has arrived, and those farmers without operating loans are going to be left high and dry.

Mr. Speaker, now is the time to approve these truly emergency funds. We must not delay action on this matter because of disputes between Congress and the White House on other matters. The supplemental bill threatens to be bogged down with billions of non-emergency spending, and I worry that this may sink the ship.

The president requested \$6 billion to fund the air campaign against Yugoslavia. Some on the other side of the aisle want to pass as much as \$20 billion. The Senate majority leader suggested \$10 or \$11 billion. I do not understand how funds the Administration has not even requested could be remotely considered emergency spending. We must remember these are Social Security funds we are spending here. If we are going to continue to claim to be fiscally responsible, we must be honest with ourselves about what is emergency funding and what is desirable funding. What ever happened to not opening the Social Security lock box unless it is an absolute emergency?

I propose that we develop and pass in the shortest possible time frame a free standing emergency agriculture spending bill to provide critical guaranteed and direct operating loan funds that our farmers need to get into the field and the FSA staff to deliver those programs. These are truly emergency funding needs. We must move forward with a clean bill for agriculture now, and not hold hostage these funds for American farmers in a raid on the Social Security trust fund to benefit non-emergency defense spending.

APPROVAL OF FARM SERVICE AGENCY EMERGENCY SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING NEEDED NOW

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. BERRY) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. BERRY. Mr. Speaker, it is springtime in America. Normally that means that there is great optimism, great excitement, particularly among our agriculture community. Our farmers know that now is the time to put the seed in the ground and prepare for the fall's harvest, to prepare to feed this country and a good portion of the rest of the world.

But, regrettably, it is a sad time in the farm community this year. Prices are low. We just had terrible disasters last year. We had a bad crop. The agriculture income is down some 28 percent.

As I traveled the First Congressional District that I am privileged to represent over the last few weeks to see the distress, the discouragement, the despair that exists in our agriculture community today, it is a terrible thing.

I rise today to once again ask the Speaker to move our agriculture emergency supplemental appropriations bill and provide the emergency loan money that this House and the Senate have both approved. It is absolutely unbelievable that the Speaker and the Republican leadership would hold America's farmers hostage as they are doing now. It is shameful.

Our farmers are good, honest, hard-working people. They had a farm bill forced upon them in 1996 that they knew was going to be a disaster, and it has been. The administration, as my distinguished colleague from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) just mentioned, made a great step forward yesterday by lifting sanctions on some of our markets, and that is going to be very helpful. But you do not get but one chance a year to make a crop, and if our farmers are not provided loans and those loans are not provided almost immediately, within the next few weeks, they will not get a chance to make a crop this year. Many of them have already missed that opportunity.

You cannot wait until the middle of the summer to plant a crop. It will be too late. You have to plant it in April and May.

It is time for our farmers to put the seed in the ground. It is time for our Speaker and the Republican leadership to let this emergency supplemental bill be conferred and give our farmers an even break.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the distinguished ranking member of the House Committee on Agriculture, a great friend of America's farmers and a great leader for America and for agriculture,

the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM).

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding, and would amplify a little more on what he has just said regarding the conference that should be going on between the House and the Senate regarding the emergency agriculture appropriation, a request sent here to this body 62 days ago from the Secretary of Agriculture, acknowledging that we were going to have some credit problems, that the amount budgeted for credit was not going to be sufficient, and, therefore, an emergency supplemental was going to be required.

Everyone knows this. The House Committee on Agriculture, both sides of the aisle, are in agreement that these monies are needed and must be forthcoming, but it is very frustrating when we have already had to have two stopgap proposals in order to just get us to the next point, that we have had to have the Secretary of Agriculture juggling various accounts just to continue to be able to provide the service in our various FSA offices.

But we are now kind of at the end of our rope. The Secretary this morning informed us that at the end of the close of business today there would no longer be the ability to accept applications for loans. This week we have averaged 150 applications per day. This is four times the normal demand for FSA loans.

It is really inexcusable that, for whatever reasons, the conferees have not been able to come up with an acceptable compromise that would allow the House to work its will. I know that there are budget considerations, and I remind everyone, including myself, when we are talking about expenditure of emergency funds, whether it be for agriculture, for Kosovo, or for any other purpose, for Central America, the emergency that has already been created there and which is also pending, something which needs to be taken care of, all of these dollars are Social Security Trust Fund dollars.

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I see we have been joined by our friend from Michigan (Mr. SMITH), and he and I and others have been working and trying to come up with proposals in which we might deal with the Social Security problem. I welcome his efforts there, and I appreciate his welcoming of mine.

But when we talk about this particular proposal today and the state of agriculture, we go into it with our eyes open. That is why the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. BERRY) and I, and I believe the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. SMITH) joined us in this, in support of the Blue Dog budget, if memory serves me correctly, and recognizing that there were going to be some additional needs, and we proposed to budget for them. The good news was that we